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## Coal bosses in Utah get off the hook for deaths in mine fire

(front page)

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GRAND JUNCTION, Colorado--Almost one year after a fire killed two miners and injured eight others at the Willow Creek Mine, near Helper, Utah, the Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA) issued an investigative report July 17. Killed in the blasts were Cory Nielson, 28, a prop man who had worked in the mine for 16 weeks, and Shane Stansfield, 29, a mechanic who had been employed there for 24 weeks.

Even though the MSHA report says that the ventilation system for the D-3 longwall mining section was not adequate and the approved ventilation plan for the mine was not being complied with, the report concluded by slapping Willow Creek's owner, the RAG American Coal Company, with only two violations. Each citation can carry a fine ranging from \$55 to \$55,000. The section of the D-3 longwall panel where the fire took place produced coal during two 10-hour shifts, seven days a week.

Willow Creek is a nonunion mine. It is managed by Cyprus Plateau Mining Corp., a subsidiary of RAG American Coal, one of the world largest coal producers. When in operation, the mine employed 325 workers and produced 5 million tons of coal annually. Shortly after the explosions all five mine portals were sealed with dirt to extinguish the fire. The mine remains sealed to this day.

MSHA reported that on July 31, 2000, at 11:48 p.m. the first of four explosions ripped through the D-3 longwall section of the Willow Creek underground mine. The first explosion occurred in the gob area behind the longwall shields, which are huge steel structures that line the coal face of the longwall and protect miners from the top or roof. As the longwall face is mined, the top falls behind the shields, which is called gob. This gob area must have adequate ventilation or methane builds up leading to explosive conditions.

Immediately after the first explosion the MSHA report says that miners saw fire at the bottom of the longwall shields. They attempted to put out the fire with a wash down hose and fire extinguishers. The wash down hose would not reach the fire area. When they ran out of fire extinguishers they could not find any more on the section.

The coal at Willow Creek is "gassy" and liberates a lot of methane. Because of the geology of the strata surrounding Willow Creek, dangerous hydrocarbons can be released as the coal is mined. Hydrocarbons, similar to diesel fuel, were present on the longwall face prior to and on July 31.

The MSHA report states, "The first explosion ignited methane and likely ignited hydrocarbon vapors, resulting in fire around and behind the headgate shields. Parts of the fire remained inaccessible. Water was ineffective in fighting the accessible portion of the fire. An adequate supply of a suitable fire-extinguisher agent was not available. The fire continued to spread through inaccessible areas of the D-3 gob and provided an ignition source for subsequent explosions. Liquid hydrocarbons were eventually ignited."

The D-3 longwall panel began mining on July 16, just 15 days before the mine fire. Willow Creek had received a variance (permit) from MSHA for two-entry longwall development. Willow Creek had also gotten a variance from MSHA to use the belt entry air to help ventilate the longwall face. At the time of the fire, however, this air was being routed "outby" and not going to the longwall face.

"This report will provide the mining industry with vital information in order to assist in preventing another such mine disaster," said David Lauriski, assistant secretary of labor for mine safety and health. Lauriski became the new head of MSHA in May 2001. According to *Coal Age*, an industry publication, he was safety director at the Wilberg mine in 1984.

On Dec. 19, 1984, a fire broke out at the Wilberg mine in Orangeville, Utah, killing 26 men and one woman. The mine was organized by the United Mine Workers of America. The disaster is considered one of the most deadly coal mine fires in Utah history. The Utah History Encyclopedia explains, "Investigation of the fire revealed serious failures by the agencies charged with assuring coal mine safety."

The fire at Wilberg began in a fresh air intake, one of three escape routes from the fifth right longwall section. The fire quickly burned through to a second exit escape way, blocking both. The third escape way had been blocked by a cave-in a few months earlier. The miners on the longwall section were trapped. Instead of ordering the owners of Wilberg to clean up the cave-in, MSHA had issued the company a variance. The union cannot appeal a variance. Halfway through the second shift on Dec. 19, 1984, the company was going for the world's record in 24-hour longwall production.

Mine rescue teams worked for three days to free the trapped miners, hoping they would still be alive. Rescuers located 25 bodies but before they could be removed the fire rekindled, forcing the rescue teams to evacuate and seal the mine. The bodies of the miners were recovered in December 1985, nearly one year after the fire. The mine was sealed and continued to burn until July 1986, when MSHA entered the mine and began its investigation. MSHA issued 34 citations against Utah Power and Light and Emery Mining Company.

At a Dec. 24, 1984, press conference UMW international safety director Joe Main explained, "These things don't just happen. Usually when fires and explosions occur, safety rules have not been complied with or they have been altered." He pointed out in particular the inadequate number of escape routes at Wilberg.

### **History of safety violations**

MSHA spokespeople quoted in a July 18 *Salt Lake Tribune* article titled, "Feds Hand Out Minor Penalties in Willow Creek Mine Blasts," claim that the citations against Willow Creek were not more severe because "there was no evidence that

Willow Creek's operators were aware of the dangerous conditions before they sent the crew into the mine."

"If we think an operator knew of the conditions, it would be a much more severe penalty," said MSHA spokesman Rodney Brown.

But the MSHA report itself says that the concentrations of methane from July 16 through August 1 at MPL B1, one of the locations for monitoring levels of methane on the longwall, had been increasing far beyond safe levels. "In the days immediately preceding the accident, the trend was accelerated," states the report. These facts were based on examinations of company records and interviews with mine examiners.

This was not the first time that the Willow Creek mine has been guilty of serious safety violations. Back in November of 1998 the mine was closed when methane gas ignited causing a blaze that took 12 months to extinguish. The 46 miners who were working at the time managed to escape without serious injury.

Records show that the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration cited Willow Creek management for 615 safety violations between October 1996 and the mine's last inspection on July 30, 2000. MSHA described 286 of the violations as "substantial and serious," meaning they posed an immediate danger of injury or death. The fines imposed on Willow Creek amounted to more than \$270,000. The violations included lack of proper roof supports and failure to test for explosive methane gas every 20 minutes where coal is being mined.

RAG bought the mine in 1999 and began mining coal in November of that year. From January 1 until July 31, 2000, MSHA inspectors were on site all but 15 days and cited the company with 256 citations, 183 "substantial and significant." No inspectors were at the mine on July 31.

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